

# Nazi Ideology and Ethics



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Edited by

Wolfgang Bialas and Lothar Fritze

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Nazi Ideology and Ethics,  
Edited by Wolfgang Bialas and Lothar Fritze

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## INTRODUCTION

### WOLFGANG BIALAS AND LOTHAR FRITZE

Historiographic work on National Socialism has made much progress. There may hardly be any period in the history of mankind which has been researched in so much detail. This holds most of all for the historic events and the National Socialist system of rule.

The description and analysis of systems of political rule form an essential part of the research on totalitarianism. However, the research of ideology-guided dictatorships – also called “ideological dictatorships” (“Weltanschauungsdiktaturen”) – must necessarily include the analysis of the ideology of the respective system. Among the essential elements of a system’s ideology there count the moral convictions expressed by the major ideologues and leaders. Who attempts to understand the rule of National Socialism as well as the crimes for which it is responsible will thus have to deal with the topic of “Ideology and Morality in National Socialism.”

In so far it is probably no coincidence that more recent research on National Socialism – apart from analyses of its system and practice of rule – increasingly deals with this topic and looks at the ethical aspects of the National Socialist ideology as well as at the moral convictions of National Socialist perpetrators. In this context, in recent years the debate has been newly stimulated by keywords such as “perpetrators with a good conscience,” “the morality of immorality,” “morality of transformation” or so called “morality in quotation marks.”

Any discussion of the topic of “National Socialist morality” faces a serious objection: “Is it not that precisely National Socialism must be considered the epitome of immorality and inhumanity, so that speaking of *National Socialist morality* and granting it any kind of *morality* is ruled out right from beginning?”

Indeed, it is not easy to escape intuitive defensiveness expressed by this question and to critically question even this absolutely legitimate preconception. For, we might ask, what kind of a morality is that supposed to be, which justifies concentration and extermination camps, “euthanasia” and the Holocaust, and by what kind of moral intuition are the perpetrators in the camps and those responsible for establishing them supposed to have

been guided? Was it not rather that the National Socialists were out for doing “evil deeds?” Indeed, was it not that they themselves represented “the evil?”

Nevertheless, in National Socialist texts of the various kinds again and again we find that moral reasons are given: National Socialist ideologues provided justifications for race policy. National Socialist authors worked with moral categories such as decency and dignity, honour and duty. Both National Socialist ideologues and perpetrators emphasized their belief to have acted within the framework of their own moral order and, as they understood it, to have behaved *morally*.

One open question is most of all the one about the motivations and reasons of those who actively contributed to the crimes or who, by agreeing with them or by expressing an indifferent attitude, made them possible at all. What kind of self-understanding guided National Socialist perpetrators? Were they really convinced that their actions could be morally justified? Or did they simply take over those reasons and explanations as provided by the National Socialist ideology?

The fact that some National Socialist perpetrators, as they often claimed, indeed considered massive violations of the human rights and even the destruction of European Jewry to have been morally *correct* and *necessary* will probably always be difficult to understand. This refusal of granting subjective moral motives even to National Socialist perpetrators can only be countered by becoming aware of the fact that understanding and comprehending human behaviour does not mean agreeing with it.

Only in exceptional cases National Socialist perpetrators may be supposed to have been pathological criminals. Often they appear as average, *ordinary* people who under different circumstances would never have felt any inclination to contribute to crime and mass murder. Was it really that the perpetrators’s capability of judgement was so much restricted by ideological indoctrination that they must actually be considered to have been criminally insane or that, at best, they could claim diminished responsibility?

Granted: This discrepancy is a theoretical challenge only if one believes the justification arguments to be credible and does not think that the good conscience the perpetrators referred to was just a fake. However, the attempt to distinguish the former from the latter reveals the limitations of moral philosophy.

This question as well as a number of others were the topic of an international congress held at the Hannah-Arendt Institute for the Research on Totalitarianism, Dresden (18-20 November 2010). Whereas research in the German-speaking countries has produced a number of studies on the ide-

ology of National Socialism, studies on “National Socialist morality” are only in their beginnings. The here presented volume documents primarily the revised and extended contributions to the congress in Dresden. This congress was meant as an encounter of moral-philosophical, historiographic and medicine-ethical research discourses on National Socialism. Some contributions were included in addition.

In his opening contribution, the first editor of this volume, *Wolfgang Bialas*, Hannah-Arendt-Institute for the Research on Totalitarianism, claims the development of an independent moral order of National Socialism. He reconstructs how National Socialist ideology, philosophy and medical ethics attempted to give reason to some race-ethical morality of which the National Socialists claimed that, being a scientific morality, it was in accordance with the laws of nature and life as well as of creation. The moral conditioning of National Socialist perpetrators aimed at developing a kind of “ethnic conscience” which restricted moral obligations to members of their own race community. Neither did they act without any moral orientation nor in the awareness that what they were doing was morally reprehensible. Among others, the following questions are discussed:

- the conditioning of a “new man” as a “race warrior” or “political soldier” whose actions, as he is free of religious and humanist resentment, are guided by a race-ethical particular morality;
- the mutual constitution of National Socialist ideology and morality in a German society which was charged with moral significance;
- the replacement of bourgeois-Christian morality by the “species-appropriate humanism” of this new race-ethical morality, justifying eugenics, euthanasia and race murder as being morally unobjectionable and necessary for population politics;
- the National Socialist threat of destruction to bourgeois society and its humanist-Christian system of values of race-indifferent care and charity, for which cultural degeneration in the course of history is made responsible;
- the entitlement to race-politically correct these developments, which was supposed to enforce again the unrestricted right of those being of high race, those being healthy and strong, in accordance with the law of natural selection;
- the phenomenon of National Socialist perpetrators with a good conscience, which was emphasized by ideologically and politically motivated criminals, both the masterminds behind the scenes and

- the opportunistic career offenders, so that, as they saw it, they would be able to act free of selfish, abject or reprehensible motives;
- finally the ambivalent discrimination against Jews as belonging to an immoral race which was at the same time identified as the epitome of a race-indifferent morality of reason which, from the point of view of the Nazis, made them particularly dangerous.

The second editor of this volume, *Lothar Fritze*, Hannah-Arendt-Institute for the Research on Totalitarianism, in his contribution pursues the question if the leading National Socialists had a different morality. At first the author states that also National Socialist perpetrators had accepted a system of moral norms while at the same time feeling the obligation to make their own behaviour subject to these norms. Among these norms there counted a minimum of moral *basic* norms which was mostly in congruence with that minimum which is also accepted by the citizens of democratic constitutional states. Thus, there is no necessity to consider National Socialist perpetrators immoral people, nor is it that they supported different moral basic norms. Furthermore, it is possible that they did what they did in the belief that they were acting in accordance with those norms they themselves accepted. If nevertheless these perpetrators committed crimes, this will be at least partially understandable, the author states, if we assume that their non-moral convictions were different. By *non-moral convictions* Fritze means convictions of a non-moral kind which, however, are included as premises into morally relevant considerations or may play a role with them. Non-moral convictions refer neither to a moral ought nor do they imply value judgements in the moral sense. However, they essentially decide about which scope rules, which reasons for justification and which derived moral norms will be accepted when it comes to the practical implementation of moral basic norms. This kind of interpretation does not at all rule out that National Socialist perpetrators, apart from other, non-moral convictions, had also different moral convictions which became manifest by the practical implementation of moral basic norms. Finally Fritze comes to the conclusion: The perpetrators, being convinced of the moral justification of their actions, failed morally, insofar as they based their actions on untenable non-moral convictions, whose untenability they would have been able to see. Perpetrators with a good conscience violated most of all *cognitive duties*.

Starting out from the frustration of widely accepted researchers of the Holocaust when trying to explain Hitler's motivations for the destruction of Jewry, *Gunnar Heinsohn* presents the following hypothesis: Soon after World War I, Hitler identified Jewry as the originator of the ban on killing,

particularly the ban on infanticide and genocide as well as on the killing of disabled people. With the development of the Jewish ethics of the sanctity of life and the protection of the stranger, traditional rights to kill were discredited and are now regarded a crime. According to Hitler, acceptance of this “Jewish ethics” resulted in unacceptable consequences. Due to the universal ban on killing, the fight of the peoples for territory is hindered and the fighting spirit of the Nordic races is undermined by a bad conscience. Based on this hypothesis Heinsohn, a sociologist, economist and genocide researcher, draws several conclusions: Hitler’s antisemitism, he says, was not of a racist-biologic nature, rather the attempt at disposing of the Jews must be understood to have been an attempt at extinguishing Jewish ethics and at reestablishing the right to kill everybody weak as well as all opponents in the racial war. Hitler, Heinsohn summarizes, had the Jewish people be shattered as he believed them to be a “source of infection” for all non-Jews, in order to erase the Jewish programme of the sanctity of life from the consciousness of the Germans. It was his goal to create a historical turning point, in order to make the pre-Mosaic, archaic tribal morality valid again.

By the example of the memoirs of Udo Klausa, *Mary Fulbrook*, Professor of German History and Director of the Centre for European Studies at University College, London, analyzes the self-exoneration strategies of National Socialist perpetrators. From February, 1940, to early December, 1942, Klausa was the District Administrator of the District of Bedzin in Upper Silesia, a district with three towns and 63 rural municipalities. At that time the local population was expelled to make room for German resettlers, and tens of thousands of Jews were deported to Auschwitz. After the war he kept hiding for a long time, to then – by help of “family connections” – be listed under the coveted Denazification Group No. 5 “exonerated.” Fulbrook demonstrates how Klausa, by condemning the practical implementation of National Socialist policy but not the basic goals of this policy, was able to keep a good conscience after the war. By always presenting other people as “real Nazis,” Klausa succeeded with distancing himself from the events, which Fulbrook considers key-tactics of self-exculpation. Furthermore, she also shows that these tactics only work to a certain degree. For Klausa’s narration shows that at least at the time when he was writing his memoirs he felt doubts and scruples concerning the legality and moral innocuousness of his activities as a District Administrator. That was why he found it impossible to admit that he contributed to certain events or even knew of them. The subjective possibility to ruthlessly participate in crimes is due, according to Fulbrook, to a kind

of “colonial racism” which was rooted in the assumption that there existed a hierarchy of peoples of higher and lower value.

Still during the war Himmler told his SS men that “immoral behaviour” would not be tolerated. In countless writings, NS propagandists had emphasized that “racial purity” was a good deserving every possible protection, that it was indeed “holy.” From these ideologic premises there resulted clear guidelines for the behaviour both of the High Command of the Wehrmacht and the SS Leadership. *Regina Mühlhäuser*, Hamburg Institute for Social Research, in her contribution shows that and how under the conditions of the war these restrictive orientations were partly given up on in favour of a rather pragmatic way of proceeding: Indeed sexual encounters – both rape and prostitution as well as consensual relationships – with native women were considered “unwelcome,” as they contradicted NS ideas on race and endangered the military discipline, health and reputation of the troops. At the same time, however, virility was considered an expression of strength, male honour and, after all, helpful with achieving the goals of the war. The Hamburg historian makes clear that only seldom military commanders really tried to enforce existing bans in this respect. Instead, Wehrmacht and SS made much efforts to keep their men under control by help of a voluminous disciplination apparatus. Whereas the Wehrmacht, by referring to girl friends and wives at home, appealed to the morality of their men, the catalogues of rules of the SS, says Mühlhäuser, read like pragmatic instructions to minimize the health hazards of sexual intercourse.

Based on a study on the NS regime’s “military code,” *Peter J. Haas*, Professor of Jewish Studies and Director of the Samuel Rosenthal Center for Judaic Studies at Case Western Reserve University, attempts to gain general insights concerning the relation of “military codes,” that is those expectations and instructions referring to the behaviour of professional soldiers, and the ethical ideas of “civilian” society. According to Haas, the NS “military code” as it developed over the time particularly for behaviour at the Eastern Front showed that any attempt of formulating objective and generally valid ethics of warfare is doomed to failure. At least in modernity warfare, he states, is outside the limits of ethical restrictions. At first Haas makes clear that and how the Wehrmacht step by step adjusted to the racist National Socialist ethics of warfare. The National Socialist “military code” provided the individual soldier with a possibility to justify his deeds. According to the author’s conviction, it is impossible to develop any set of rules which will reliably enforce “humane warfare.” The treatment of Soviet prisoners of war, as it was codified and finally implemented by the “Commissar Order,” does not only reflect the evil nature of war as

such but presents war as a rational system without any inner moral correctives.

The National Socialists were supporters of Darwin's evolution theory. Hitler and other leading National Socialists assumed that man originated from the animal world. *Richard Weikart*, History Professor at California State University, Stanislaus, summarizes the evolution theory-based National Socialist attitude towards ethics and morality by the term "evolution ethics" – a term which was in fact not used by the National Socialists. National Socialist evolution ethics, Weikart states, were based on a racist version of neo-Darwinism. By his contribution the author shows in which ways moral obligations were based on reaching back to laws of biology presented by curricula for the ideological education of SS and police. The fight against the three main causes of the decline of any people was considered a moral obligation for any German citizen and anyway for any member of the Nordic race: a declining birth rate, so called counter selection and the mixture of races. After all, says Weikart, the race policy of the SS did not only aim at supporting the interests of the Nordic peoples but – according to the self-understanding of the SS – was anyway meant to serve for the further development of mankind. Thus, evolution ethics contradicted democratic norms, humanitarian considerations and the idea of equal rights.

Given the murder of mentally ill and disabled people – called "euthanasia" – as well as the murderous experiments on humans at the concentration camps, there is the question of how such blatant violations of elementary rules of humanity and medical care were possible. Looking for possible answers, *Florian Bruns*, a medical historian at the University of Erlangen, reviews the ethical standards pursued by German physicians between 1933 and 1945. Bruns asks about the moral convictions of German physicians at that time as well as in how far they were influenced by National Socialist ideology. Were there specifically National Socialist medical ethics, and if yes, who communicated them to physicians and students of medicine in Germany? The author outlines the German ethics discourses in the realm of medicine and presents the crucial protagonists and institutions as well as their working in this context. Finally, Bruns demonstrates how, by way of the National Socialist practice of enforced sterilization, two constitutive principles of medical morality at the same time were officially made invalid – medical secrecy and the rule that a physician must not do any harm to a patient; he discusses the postulate that the individual had an obligation to be healthy and makes clear that obviously many physicians contributing to the "euthanasia" killings were convinced of doing the morally right thing.

The murder of psychically and mentally ill people during World War II – euphemistically summarized by the term “euthanasia” – is also in the focus of the study by *Uwe Kaminsky*. This medical and law historian shows on the one hand that even under National Socialism such killings needed justification, and on the other hand he shows how euphemistic justifications (“mercy killings,” “Freimachungsmaßnahmen (provisions to make room)” for purposes of air raid protection contributed to reducing the inhibition threshold towards transgressing the ban on killing. Kaminsky makes clear that eugenic arguments, which were taken up again in the period of National Socialism, did not automatically trigger off the “destruction of life unworthy of life.” According to Kaminsky, the thesis that National Socialist euthanasia can be logically explained by racial hygiene ignores both the National Socialist polycracy and the dynamics of events, which is due to rule-immanent competition. Accordingly, in analogy to the twisted road to the Holocaust the author speaks of the “twisted road” to “euthanasia.” His contribution works out the justifications and reasons given for the National Socialist acts of killing and makes obvious that in the course of the war medical selection criteria retreated to the back in favour of economic-utilitarian aspects. Then, it is stated, the “euthanasia” killings were justified most of all by considerations of utility and by referring to emergency. In this context, Kaminsky says, Protestant theologians indeed recognized in principle the possibility of an emergency indication, however in contrast to the attitude of official representatives of the NS regime they stated that actually such a situation was not given. Nevertheless, throughout the entire war the Churches rejected euthanasia.

*Gerrit Hohendorf*, psychiatrist, medical historian and medical ethicist at the Technical University of Munich, asks if insights regarding the current debate on euthanasia can be gained from the history of National Socialist “euthanasia.” At first sight, he says, the matter is clear: The killings of ill people during National Socialism have nothing to do with euthanasia as we understand it these days. The National Socialists misused the term “euthanasia” to hide their true intentions. However, in the author’s opinion a detailed analysis of the genesis of the various forms of NS “euthanasia” reveals the slippery slope on which the debate on the legal status of so called “life unworthy of life” happened in Germany since the early 1920s at the latest. The way in which the euthanasia actions happened would have been impossible without the concept of medical relief. Hohendorf reconstructs the current German euthanasia debate and in this context points out to a problem which, in his opinion, is not appropriately reflected on. That is: Who decides about what life means for those being incapable of expressing their will? In case of patients who are incapable of making

an autonomous decision, as is Hohendorf's thought, it is still the physician who must decide about certain degrees of suffering, according to the principle of self-determination. An additional argument is that the legalization of killing on request or medical assistance with suicide on the basis of the principle of self-determination might result in severely disabled people who are suffering very much might feeling an obligation to decide for suicide, in order of not being a burden for society.

The SS committed evil deeds at a large scale. At the same time it played an important role with conceptualizing National Socialist ethics. But still, asks *André Mineau*, Professor of Ethics and History at the University of Quebec, Canada, can "ethics of the evil" be imagined at all, as after all ethics are about the good? At first the author demonstrates that and how SS ethics combined deontological, consequentialist and perfectionist approaches, organized around moral concepts such as duty, the good and virtuousness, while at the same time bereaving these concepts of their universal nature. It replaced the universal validity of moral norms by some biologic egotism which was oriented at the law of natural selection. Accordingly, for SS ethics three dangers were relevant: The decline of the birth rate, counter selection and the mixture of races. For the SS, moral behaviour meant behaving in the interest of the German people, in the context of which belonging to the German people was defined on the basis of racial criteria, and the realization of the common good was understood in the sense of preserving the racial substance of the people. According to Mineau, this way of restricting the common good to one people legitimated every kind of violence, after all. By attributing value only to part of humanity, SS ethics pursued excessive egotism, thus at the same time showing a strong nihilistic component.

*Amy Carney*, a historian from Ohio University, discusses Himmler's efforts to make the SS a "kinship community" to which not only his SS men but also their wives and children as well as their descendants were supposed to belong. The precondition for access to this community was belonging to the Nordic race. On the basis of belonging to the common Nordic blood, she states, one had intended to overcome every difference – religion, regional identities, class differences – and to establish a race-conscious biologic and cultural community which was supposed to become the vanguard of the National Socialist race state. The author demonstrates how in this context the SS weekly "Das Schwarze Korps" became kind of an ideologic mouthpiece of the SS, focusing on topics such as eugenics, the significance of marriage and family as well as on the Third Reich's population policy. "Das Schwarze Korps," Amy Carney makes clear, was meant for spreading and explaining the biologic world view of

the SS and after all served for the creation of a racist aristocracy in National Socialist Germany.

The Dresden historian *Christopher Theel* in his contribution discusses the jurisdiction of SS and police. First of all it was supposed to have the function of a jurisdiction for the Waffen SS and thus be a tool of the political and military leadership in the hands of the Reichsführer SS. Furthermore, according to Himmler's will it was supposed to develop into a new kind of jurisdiction, free of Roman legal thought and based on a Germanic sense of justice. Thus, it was supposed to develop a kind of jurisdiction which was in accordance with the nature of National Socialism and the tasks of the National Socialist state, claiming to finally become a model for criminal justice in general. As Theel demonstrates, SS and police courts were supposed to do the "pioneering work." In this context the author discusses efforts of liberating the "judge" from the "inflexible framework of the law" and increasing his significance for the finding of justice as well as the thus connected attempts to replace the traditional "offence-oriented penal law" by an "offender-oriented penal law" considering the entire personality of the offender. Among others, the task of this kind of jurisprudence was supposed to provide the German people with a legal system which was grounded on a "völkisch sense of justice." At the same time, however, one was aware of the fact that, for example concerning the question of the killing of "life unworthy of life," such a sense of justice could not be assumed for the majority of the German people who still had to be educated towards a sense of justice in the National Socialist sense. By the example of the notorious verdict by the Supreme SS and Police Court against Max Täubner in 1943 Theel demonstrates the attitude of SS judges towards problems of legal practice resulting from the murderous task of the SS.

In his contribution, the philosopher *Wulf Kellerwessel* from Münster points out to a grave difficulty of some contemporary moral concepts resulting from the problem of *rational* criticism of National Socialist norms of behaviour. He tries to prove that open or hidden relativism in ethics makes a reason-guided criticism of National Socialist norms of behaviour impossible. The author demonstrates this by the examples of the positions of G. Harman, B. Williams and M. Walzer. Both Harman's and Williams's meta-ethical convictions as well as Harman's internalism are said to be problematic, and also Walzer's reiterative "universalism" is said to lack critical substance. Of course, Kellerwessel says, these moral philosophers are not at all under the suspicion of sympathizing with an inhuman ideology such as National Socialism. Nevertheless their moral concepts are said to be inappropriate for a convincing criticism of National

Socialism and its rules of conduct. A normative kind of universalism, Kellerwessel states, has an appropriate potential for criticism. This is particularly true for discourse-analytical universalism.

The philosopher *Rolf Zimmermann* from Konstanz gives reasons to his thesis that both National Socialism and Bolshevism represent historical phenomena of being morally different and that their practice of mass destruction may be understood to have been racial or class murder *out of morality*. This interpretation, says Zimmermann, looks less paradox if speaking about morality is not right from the beginning restricted to a certain topical preliminary understanding or to apriori structures. The analysis of both National Socialism and Bolshevism reveals their moral cores, social-political structures of norms and violence structures as historical alternatives to the egalitarian universalism of the western tradition. In the author's opinion, the "rupture of species" that National Socialism and in particular the Holocaust represented, indicates a transformation towards being morally different, with corresponding "sociocides" on the side of Bolshevism. Apart from important differences, the prospect of creating "new man" with a new kind of morality was the overarching common ground which, furthermore, resulted in an innerworldly "redemption morality." According to Zimmermann, both moral-historical formations must be understood to have been radically particularistic entities, in contrast to a universalist kind of morality. Thus, in the course of a comparative consideration of morality, also the particular suitability of egalitarian universalism as a descriptive and normative guideline of alternative moralities becomes obvious. Zimmermann supports a concept of a meta-ethical pluralism which puts any kind of monistic moral consideration into question. Being a product of the historical development since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, universalism must be seen in its contingency. Its moral guiding concept of human equality is said to be not grounded in nature or reason but in the will to make all humans equal, something which can be historically-processually universalized but not conceptually guaranteed.

*Isaac Hershkowitz*, Professor of Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, provides a meta-ethical study on Jewish answers to the Holocaust. Based on a phenomenological overview of the range of answers to the question of which ethical conclusions must be drawn from the Holocaust, the author develops a model of Jewish ethical answers. According to Hershkowitz, at first two diverging approaches must be distinguished: the particularistic and the universalistic approach. Particularistic answers interpreting the Holocaust as the "sound of God's trumpet" in reaction to a concrete mistake in the life of the Jewish community are classified as being "ideologic." "Moral enlightenment," Hershkowitz assumes, can be

expected only from universalistic answers, they are the only ones to provide a message which can be accepted by all mankind. Although different strands can be identified also within the universalistic approach, the various thinkers are characterized by a certain “moral restlessness” as well as by the opinion, on which they all agree, that they are facing the task of fixing the world. These Jewish thinkers feel the urge to reestablish the moral reputation of the world.

*Stewart Anderson* and *Wulf Kansteiner*, cultural-intellectual historians at Binghamton University, claim that Holocaust studies lack a comprehensive critical analysis of the history and structure of the moralistic world of Holocaust remembrance. The authors differentiate between four types of moral interventions, namely primarily ontologically, ethically, normatively and applied-ethically oriented moral statements, distinctions that they apply in their analysis of ZDF television programmes about the Holocaust between the mid-1960s and the present. They consider the early 1980s – i.e. the period after the invention of the Holocaust paradigm and before the commercialization of German television – the most self-reflective and self-critical era of German history TV. Anderson and Kansteiner extensively discuss the so called Knopp TV of historical entertainment that has successfully combined politically correct anti-Nazi messages with ambivalent visual products celebrating Nazi power. Finally, they focus on the broadcasting of violent Holocaust Memory that they explore as a combination of Holocaust curiosity, philosemitic values and the overcoming of taboos and inhibitions.

# **ETHICAL CONCEPTIONS**



# NAZI ETHICS AND MORALITY: IDEAS, PROBLEMS AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

WOLFGANG BIALAS

National Socialism and the Holocaust were seen as the destruction of the moral fabric of the Western world and as a possible relapse of mankind to barbarism. In this context, the Holocaust was defined as a pathological deviation from modernity. Being the incarnation of man's unnatural, always fragile domestication, morality was considered a kind of safeguarding which had been imposed on man in contradiction to his inherent nature. The Holocaust perpetrators were said to have revealed that, below the surface of cultural domestication and moral safeguards, man had been lying in wait for opportunities to become once more that beast he had always been despite his guise as a civilized being. However, Auschwitz was not only described as a *break* with European modernity but also as a *consequence* of its ambivalences and potentials for destruction.<sup>1</sup> Finally, speaking of *violation* and *failure as a species* points to the destructive rationality of Nazi ethnocentric morality having prevailed over a universal morality of reason.<sup>2</sup>

Research on Nazi morality and ethics is still in its infancy in the respective German-language literature,<sup>3</sup> and the discussion here has only just

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michael Prinz and Rainer Zitelmann (eds.), *Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Rolf Zimmermann, *Philosophie nach Auschwitz. Eine Neubestimmung von Moral in Politik und Gesellschaft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Haas, *Morality after Auschwitz. The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic for English-language literature* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre (eds.), *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust* (Aldershot/ Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003). For the German debate cf. Werner Konitzer and Raphael Gross (eds.), *Moralität des Bösen. Ethik und nationalsozialistische Verbrechen* (Frankfurt a. M./New York: Campus, 2009); as well as Raphael Gross, *Anständig geblieben. Nationalsozialistische Moral* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2010).

begun using buzzwords such as “Nazi perpetrators with a good conscience,”<sup>4</sup> “the morality of immorality,” “nationalist transformational morality,” *so-called* Nazi morality, or “morality in inverted commas.”<sup>5</sup> These concepts and metaphors as they are being utilized in the debate indicate that research sees accepting any autonomous Nazi morality as controversial. In the final analysis, what kind of morality could justify concentration camps, extermination camps, euthanasia, and the Holocaust? It is entirely appropriate to call Auschwitz “the reality of the morally impossible,”<sup>6</sup> and there is no doubt that Nazism was the embodiment of immorality and inhumanity. The persecution, exclusion, and destruction of European Jewry was not only a crime for which there is no precedent, it was also deeply *immoral*. No further justification is needed for this statement, even though it leaves a plethora of questions unanswered. For instance, is it most crucially a question of comprehending why the Nazi perpetrators *committed* their crimes? Or does the greater challenge lie in understanding why they did not *recognize* what they were doing as criminal? Thus, assuming that they actually believed race ethics to be a justification for the necessity of destroying the Jews, did they really think they were morally justified?

## **I. The Nazi Value Revolution: Racial Ethics and the Conditioning of the New Man**

The Nazi value revolution aimed at reversing the bourgeois-Christian system of values. Its successful and sustainable transformation allowed the Nazi perpetrators to act on the belief that their behavior was morally unobjectionable or even imperative. Specific directives and behavioral expectations replaced traditional values. However, even when people start acting unjustly and immorally, they still seek to justify their behavior – that much more so when they explicitly overstep a set of informal limits of a culturally established moral order, in other words, when they do things that are criminal and immoral according to valid norms. Most people would recoil in horror from acting in a fashion they themselves believed to be immoral.

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<sup>4</sup> Lothar Fritze, *Täter mit gutem Gewissen. Über menschliches Versagen im diktatorischen Sozialismus* (Cologne/Weimar: Böhlau, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Werner Konitzer, “Moral oder ‘Moral?’ Einige Überlegungen zum Thema ‘Moral und Nationalsozialismus,’” in Werner Konitzer/Raphael Gross (eds.), *Moralität des Bösen. Ethik und nationalsozialistische Verbrechen* (Frankfurt a. M./New York: Campus, 2009), pp. 97-115.

<sup>6</sup> Hartmut Kuhlmann, “Ohne Auschwitz,” *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol. 45 (1997) no. 1, pp. 101-110, here 107.

Apparently, it is necessary to plausibly portray immorality as the morality of a new order to make sure that people are willing to fall in line. It was important for the Nazi perpetrators to appear to themselves as decent people acting in a moral fashion.

There was a great likelihood that people who were not critical or skeptical of the Nazi system or who did not reject it outright would act as they were expected to. Most of all, they did not want to act conspicuously, which is why they preferred to live with as little disturbance as possible. In general, they had no moral scruples. Instead, they implied that it was neither *moral* nor *immoral* but just reasonable to think of themselves and to act in accordance with their own interests. The biological value revolution of Nazism did not just give up on conventional morality but substituted it with a new racial morality. It replaced universal values and thought patterns of bourgeois morality that it considered incompatible with race ethics while integrating others into its own value system. Among those taken on and incorporated into the new moral order were the conscience as the inner authority of moral self-questioning, ethically discriminating selfishness as something immoral, allowing for the possibility of having misgivings as a sign of moral seriousness, and overcoming the latter as a proof of moral strength. Nazi ethics also renewed the validity of common sense moral values and explicitly condemned lying, stealing, cheating, corruption, cruelty, and murder as immoral and therefore unbecoming of a decent German.

Racial biological naturalism and metaphysical politics declared that humans were vehicles of higher principles. Their value was determined by whether they helped engineer these principles through their actions, stood in the way of those principles, or even promoted principles to the contrary. Within the framework of race ethics, individuals were reduced to being members of a race who jointly were either doomed to destruction if they happened to be Jews or destined to rule the world if they were members of the Nordic race such as the Germans. Their *personal* interests and intentions only counted if they were in line with their racial affiliation. As individuals they were considered subordinates to *history*, the *nation*, the *party*, and the *Fuehrer* whose goals they were supposed to support.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Bialas, "Der Nationalsozialismus und die Intellektuellen. Die Situation der Philosophie," in Idem/Manfred Gangl (eds.), *Intellektuelle im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt a. M./Berlin/Bern/Bruxelles/New York/Oxford/Vienna: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 13-50.

Nazism attempted to establish a scientific ethics by means of a biopolitical radicalization of Social Darwinism.<sup>8</sup> Claiming morality to be in conjunction with the laws of nature and life was to ensure its plausibility in an era that believed in scientific and technical solutions to actual or ideologically constructed social problems. The Nazi worldview was highly compatible with the intuitive worldview of many people, whom it relieved of the burden of making their own moral judgments and to whose value system it gave systematic coherence and scientific plausibility.<sup>9</sup> It also suggested what they needed to do if they wanted to be in harmony with this system of ethics. Many welcomed the fact that it *relieved* them of their responsibility and the necessity of having to morally judge their behavior.

Nazi ideology and morality justified one another. The Nazi society was burdened with moral meanings, and Nazi racial morality itself was an ideological construct. The use of arguments concerning history, natural laws, race, population policy, national hygiene, and biology was supposed to provide the Nazi racial policy with a pseudoscientific framework of reference. Moral concepts such as decency, honor, loyalty, and duty played an important role in Nazi ideology. The Nazi movement tried to give the impression that it was guided by moral principles and values and that it also demanded its adherents to follow these principles.

The Nazi ideology agenda was to create a new morality that justified itself on three levels: 1. by documenting a *crisis* of bourgeois morality, 2. through the *vision* of a new morality, and 3. through the moral *conditioning* of the *new man*.<sup>10</sup> Nazi morality perceived itself as being:

- a *higher* morality geared towards absolute values and ideas in contrast to an intuitive *common sense* morality,
- a *German* morality in contrast to a *non-German* morality,

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<sup>8</sup> On social Darwinism see Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); Paul Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870-1945* (New York/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 11-60.

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Haas, "Doing Ethics in an Age of Science," in Jack Bemporad/John T. Pawlikowski/ Joseph Sievers (eds.), *Good and Evil After Auschwitz. Ethical implications for today* (Hoboken/NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2000), pp. 109-118, here 110.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. from the Nazi point of view Herbert Graf, *Der neue Mensch im neuen Staat* (Berlin: P. Schmidt, 1934) and Erich Jaensch, *Der Gegentypus. Psychologisch-anthropologische Grundlagen deutscher Kulturphilosophie, ausgehend von dem, was wir überwinden wollen* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1938).

- a *racially conscious* morality in contrast to a racially indifferent morality,
- a *national* morality in contrast to the *internationalist class* morality which they claimed would split the nation and the people into hostile social groups,
- a *master* morality for asserting the rights of the stronger in contrast to a morality of protecting the *weak* and needy from the encroachments of the powerful,
- a *racial* morality with a global reach in contrast to and competition with *bourgeois-Christian* morality and *Bolshevist atheism*, and
- an *anti-Jewish* morality.

The following theoretical justifications and thought patterns were supposed to document the plausibility of Nazi morality:

- the subordination of the individual to the functionality of a greater whole or the assertion of *higher* ideas,
- the acceptance of eternal laws of nature and life, and in particular the law of natural selection, whose effectiveness was restricted by Christian-Jewish morality of equality and humanity,
- the substitution of universal values with ethnic values based on the distinction between superior and inferior life,
- the claim to intervene in the biological foundations and cultural conditions of human life for the sake of racial perfection,<sup>11</sup>
- the presumption of judging people according to their value and usefulness in the new racial order.

Nazi morality was conceived as a procedural virtue ethics. It combined absolute virtues that demanded unconditional obedience with the attitude of social engineering and replaced *common sense* intuitions with an ideological catalog of virtues and commands. The ideal of the *new man* was the race-conscious and ideologically dedicated and knowledgeable worldview warrior (“Weltanschauungskrieger”) – the political soldier who would be able to perform crimes for the sake of the Nordic race and Germany with a clean conscience while at the same time perfectly convinced

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde. Anpassung, Ausmerze und Aufbegehren unter dem Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne: Bund, 1982) as well as Peukert, “Die Genesis der Endlösung aus dem Geiste der Wissenschaft,” in *Zerstörung des moralischen Selbstbewusstseins: Chance oder Gefährdung?*, ed. by Forum für Philosophie (Bad Homburg) (Frankfurt a. M. 1988), pp. 24-48.

of doing the right thing and acting morally.<sup>12</sup> The trademark of this new type of man was his capacity of moral judgment as defined by Nazism that made him always act creatively on his own initiative and not just follow orders blindly or mechanically.<sup>13</sup> He was not presented as someone who thoughtlessly took and obeyed orders without hesitation but as someone who consciously took on responsibility. Being physically and spiritually healthy and tough on himself, he always considered the consequences of his actions. When he made a decision, he insisted on doing what he considered necessary, just, and moral. “We want one thing above all – to be honest to ourselves and know why we act one way and not another. We want to be aware of the consequences of our actions [...] We want to live in such a fashion that we can always be responsible for ourselves.”<sup>14</sup>

Nazi ideology asked the German people to develop *biological* attitudes and feelings as part of a racial character in order to form an “ethnic conscience”<sup>15</sup> that only recognized moral obligations towards *members of its own race*. Attempts to create a racial conscience in contrast to racial indifference emphasized personal responsibility.<sup>16</sup> The moral core of man was supposed to be his conscience, which was considered the symbol of his life as a moral subject. Guided by his conscience, he would have to prove that his actions would live up to his normative self-image.

“Non-Aryans” and “parasites to the community” were refused moral care and charity. The new morality was only for the members of one's own race who were not suffering from any inherited disease. Nazi racial politics tried to prevent “foreign blood” from coming into contact with the community of Nordic Germans. In other words, in contrast to a supposedly diffuse concept of Christian charity, moral empathy was restricted to members of the Nazi racial people's community whereas the *racially inferior* and *those of alien race* were excluded from mutual moral obligations. Altogether, the Germans were supposed to trust Nazi ideology and judgments based on race ethics more than their intuitive moral judgment based on their own experiences. Due to their racio-ethical indoctrination they

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<sup>12</sup> Gerhard Stödtner, *Soldaten des Alltags. Ein Beitrag zur Überwindung des bürgerlichen Menschen* (Leipzig: Armanen-Verlag, 1939) and Paula Diehl, *Macht – Mythos – Utopie. Die Körperbilder der SS-Männer* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2005), p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> “Moral – kritisch betrachtet,” *Das Schwarze Korps*, August 31, 1944, no. 35, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge/MA/London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Martin Staemmler, “Aufgaben und Ziele der Rassenpflege,” *Ziel und Weg*, vol. 3 (1933) no. 14, pp. 415-422, here 41.

were to be capable of participating in the persecution of the Jews without any moral scruples. This was simultaneously portrayed as their racial and ethical upgrading (“moralische Aufartung”) to the *level* of the *new man* who supposedly needed the struggle for existence in order to stay healthy and to protect himself against weakening.<sup>17</sup>

The ideology of racial biology implied that racial membership and the corresponding affinity to a particular morality were generated by inheritance. The fact that the Germans belonged to the Nordic race placed a particular moral obligation on them not to forfeit the *possibility* of being a member of a superior race by racial misbehavior. The members of the higher race were supposed to act in a racially conscious fashion in order to prove that they were worthy of belonging. They were expected to demonstrate through their “commitment, struggle and personal dedication”<sup>18</sup> to the cause of Nazism that they deserved to be counted among the racial elite. They were called upon to form a racial value system that would guide them not only in political clashes but also in their everyday lives. In other words, by taking part in persecuting and stigmatizing the Jews the Germans were supposed to demonstrate their assent to the new racial order. Their sacrifice and dedication to the cause of Nazism was supposed to demonstrate that they were personally ready to take advantage of the opportunities offered them by their racial membership.

Nazi racial ethics allowed the members of the Nordic race individual space for development. The reason given was that if humans were already predetermined by racial membership, the concepts of responsibility, guilt, and failure would be inherently inapplicable. Any teachings that stated that people were exclusively biological would leave no room for personal success or failure but rather predisposed them to certain values, ideals, and convictions due to their racial belonging. Therefore, ordinary Germans were supposed to stress their predisposition to racial superiority through developing the appropriate attitudes and behavior already ascribed to them by their racial membership.

The moral discrimination of the Jews was justified by means of a selective racial morality that replaced a universal morality of reason. Through personally participating in persecuting the Jews the Germans were expected to internalize the new morality of race-conscious toughness and mercilessness towards racial enemies and inferiors. It was true that the Jews were declared superfluous in a future society organized exclusively

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Kötschau, “Zur nationalsozialistischen Revolution in der Medizin,” *Ziel und Weg*, vol. 4 (1934) no. 23, pp. 884-889, here pp. 884.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Leese, *Rasse – Religion – Ethos. Drei Kapitel zur religiösen Lage der Gegenwart* (Gotha: L. Klotz, 1934), p. 16.

according to racial criteria. Still, they were functional for *bringing about* this order because they were needed to morally condition the *new man* to become a *racial warrior* and *biological soldier*. Being aware of his responsibility toward his race and his people, the *new man* was supposed to be capable of withstanding “all foreign temptations not in harmony with his race.”<sup>19</sup> Since humans cannot rely on their drives to intuitively act in accordance with their kind in the way animals do, they would have to be trained to think, feel, and act biologically. Conditioning Germans to rely on their instincts to act morally was to make them act intuitively in harmony with race laws.

Animals were deemed superior to humans in that they behaved in congruence with their own kind. Acting otherwise was practically impossible for them as natural selection was seen to filter out those who *differed from their own* and contradicted their nature. As Hitler put it in "Mein Kampf": According to "the will of Nature for a higher breeding of all life [...] the stronger must dominate and not blend with the weaker, thus sacrificing his own greatness. Only the born weakling can view this as cruel. [...]"

The consequence of this racial purity universally valid in nature is not only the sharp outward delimitation of the various races but their uniform inherent character. The fox is always a fox, the goose a goose, the tiger a tiger, etc., and the difference can at best belie at most in the varying measure of force, strength, intelligence, dexterity, endurance etc., of the individual specimens. But you will never find a fox who in his inner attitude might, for example, show humanitarian tendencies toward geese, as similarly there is no cat with a friendly inclination toward mice.”<sup>20</sup>

The history of human civilization, on the other hand, was considered a failed experiment in promoting variety, difference, and tolerance. Racial indifference that deliberately ignored race as a core principle of nature, life, and creation and also denied natural selection and racial coherence, was blamed for the decay, confusion, and suppression of human nature. More specifically, racial mixing and racially indifferent behavior were to blame for the decline of mankind. Humanity would have to reconcile with its biological nature, enabling it to resist the temptation to behave indifferently toward race and to cultivate the sovereignty of racial selfishness - through a conscious attempt to thwart the cultural domestication ultimately

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<sup>19</sup> Franz Schattenfroh, *Wille und Rasse* (Berlin/Zürich/Vienna: Payer & Co., 1939), p. 182.

<sup>20</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Translated by Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), p. 285.

culpable for its estrangement. Conditioning people to act instinctively immediately suggested that such behavior was *moral*.<sup>21</sup>

The bio-political restructuring of society along the category of race perceived people as part of an anthropological experiment. In such an experiment, the master race was supposed to be morally conditioned to exterminate the racially inferior, those unworthy of life. The development of the *new man* who could exterminate those unworthy of life with a clear conscience propelled the new Nazi morality to supersede an allegedly defunct one. The SS, as the racial elite, demonstrated “that it was possible to fabricate a race by annihilating other races.”<sup>22</sup> Their members saw themselves as the prototypes of the new man. As the racial avant-garde of Germany’s societal transfiguration, the SS even perceived itself as a fertile social and ethical microcosm within which they had already practiced the future morality of strength and ruthlessness.

## **II. The New Morality: Superseding Bourgeois Racial Indifference with Racially Appropriate Humanism**

The racio-biological differentiation of humanity that distinguished inferior and superior races stood in contrast to the value system of bourgeois society. Nazi ethics claimed to radically break with obsolete traditional humanistic ethics but also utilized traditional concepts of moral philosophy such as the Categorical Imperative. It declared a moral state of emergency which justified a political and holistic anthropological upheaval. An individual-oriented bourgeois morality was replaced by a *völkisch* morality of race and community. Adopting Nietzsche’s critique of Christian morality as a protection of the weak, needy, and inferior and those unworthy of life from the grasp of the strong and powerful destined to be the masters, bourgeois morality was criticized as a historically anachronistic slave morality that had managed to implant a guilty conscience in the master race.<sup>23</sup> Nazi ideology and ethics countered this supposed universalization of a morality of weakness with the vision of a master race acting with *moral* superiority in good conscience. The *new man* was supposed to liberate himself from the fetters of moral obligations to the weak and needy and to subordinate his life to racial imperatives instead of following outdated precepts of unconditional humanity and charity.

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<sup>21</sup> “Dem Leben verschworen,” *Das Schwarze Korps*, May 20, 1943, no. 20, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1976), p. 412.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Der Antichrist,” in Idem, *Werke in 6 Bänden, Bd. 4*, ed. by Karl Schlechta (Munich/Vienna: Hanser, 1980), pp. 1161-1235, here 1168.

During National Socialism, questions of ethics and morality were discussed not only in the social sciences and humanities<sup>24</sup> or medicine<sup>25</sup> but also in ideological diatribes,<sup>26</sup> journalistic essays, prose, and poetry.<sup>27</sup> This led to a varied array of conceptualizations of Nazi ethics:

- As a “eugenic ethics”<sup>28</sup> it was supposed to be grounded in “racial conscience.”<sup>29</sup>
- As a *selective racial ethics* directed against an *unnatural* morality of racially indifferent humanity it was restricted to the members of the German people’s community.<sup>30</sup>
- As a *natural ethics of life* it was supposed to *boost* life that conformed to the laws of nature and life.<sup>31</sup>
- As a *soldierly* ethics it saw struggle, strength of character, and willingness to sacrifice as opposed to *old bourgeois* values of an oversaturated society whose value system had not stood the test of time and therefore was defeated by competing value systems.<sup>32</sup>
- As a *German* ethics it was neither supposed to be a bureaucratic ethics nor a legal ethics but rather a morality of action, a master morality, a morality of the people, and a morality of struggle.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kurt Hildebrandt, *Norm, Entartung, Verfall, Bezogen auf den Einzelnen, die Rasse, den Staat* (Berlin: W. Kohlhammer, 1934). Georg Usadel, *Zucht und Ordnung. Grundlagen einer nationalsozialistischen Ethik* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1935) as well as Gerhard Hennemann, *Grundzüge einer deutschen Ethik* (Leipzig: A. Klein, 1938).

<sup>25</sup> Kötschau, “Zur nationalsozialistischen Revolution in der Medizin,” pp. 884-889.

<sup>26</sup> “Arteigene Sittlichkeit,” *Das Schwarze Korps*, May 6, 1937, no. 18, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Kurt Eggers, *Vom mutigen Leben und tapferen Sterben* (Oldenburg i. O.: Gerhard Stalling, 1935) as well as Erwin Guido Kolbenheyer, *Zwei Reden: Das Geistesleben in seiner volksbiologischen Bedeutung* (Munich: Langen Müller, 1942).

<sup>28</sup> F. C. S. Schiller, “Die Eugenik als sittliches Ideal,” *Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie*, vol. 24 (1930), pp. 342-347, here 342.

<sup>29</sup> Edgar Weidner, “Das neue ärztliche Denken im nationalsozialistischen Staate,” *Ziel und Weg*, vol. 4 (1934) no. 13, pp. 486-490, continued and concluded in no. 14, pp. 524-527.

<sup>30</sup> Friedbert Schulze, *Das Sittengesetz des nordischen Menschen* (Leipzig: A. Klein, 1933), p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst Kriek, *Mythologie des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* (Leipzig: Armanen-Verlag, 1939), p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> “Das Gesetz zur Sicherung der Einheit von Partei und Staat (1933/1934),” *Nationalsozialistisches Jahrbuch 1938*, pp. 148-163, here 152-153.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Hennemann, *Grundzüge einer deutschen Ethik*.